

## ***The Boston Red Sox Tuesday, April 18, 2017***

### **\* *The Boston Globe***

#### **Craig Kimbrel saves another victory — and the bullpen**

Alex Speier

Craig Kimbrel wasn't supposed to pitch Monday. The Red Sox closer, after recording saves with a perfect inning on both Saturday and Sunday, was slated for a day off while entrusting late-innings responsibilities to others.

But after the righthander went through his pregame routine, he took stock of both his own physical state and that of his bullpen. On a day when Matt Barnes wasn't going to be able to pitch, Kimbrel told manager John Farrell that he could handle the ninth.

That self-assessment is nothing new. Kimbrel said he couldn't recall any instance in his career when he declined a chance to close out a save for a third straight day.

"There might be a day, but today wasn't it," said Kimbrel. "Before I went out to the bullpen, I told John I felt great and if the situation was there, I wanted it."

So Farrell was more than willing to turn to his closer for the third straight day. The righthander responded by overpowering Tampa Bay to secure a 4-3 win.

Against the most dangerous part of the Rays lineup, Kimbrel displayed electrifying stuff, mixing fastballs in the high 90s with his power curve. With 15 pitches, he punched out Corey Dickerson (98-m.p.h. fastball, swinging) and Kevin Kiermaier (86 m.p.h. curveball, looking) before closing out the game with a 99-m.p.h. fastball that caught Evan Longoria looking.

Kimbrel's mere willingness to pitch proved game-changing in terms of how Farrell could employ matchups. But in completing a three-day run in which he retired all nine hitters he faced (striking out seven), Kimbrel gave perhaps the most compelling glimpse in his Red Sox career of a pitcher who has been one of the most dominant closers in history.

Farrell described the 28-year-old Kimbrel as being "in the best spot he's been in from a delivery standpoint since he's been here," with the resulting two-pitch mix overwhelming Tampa Bay's hitters this series. Kimbrel's early-season struggles to locate his curveball for strikes ceased to be an issue, leaving the Rays little chance of mounting a rally.

"When [the curveball is] competitive out of the hand and he sells it off the same fastball height, it's electric stuff," said bullpen coach Dana LeVangie. "You blend in 99 with angle and you have deception, it's incredible."

Kimbrel's results this year are suggesting as much. Through seven innings, he has a 1.29 ERA with six saves (most in the American League), 12 strikeouts, and two walks. Dating to last year, he has converted 25 save opportunities in a row, the second-longest active streak in the big leagues.

Still, what he did over the weekend — and particularly Monday — was distinct from the saves that preceded it. For most pitchers, a third straight day represents a need to turn from pure power to Jedi mind tricks. Often, there will be some concession made in terms of velocity or the action of pitches.

For Kimbrel, Monday represented the opposite.

“He’s a freak,” said fellow reliever Robbie Ross Jr. “He’s a superstar, man. He just brings it. You can always count on Craig to go out there with his best stuff.”

Throughout his career, that’s often been true of Kimbrel when taking the mound in back-to-back-to-back games. Monday marked the 16th straight instance, dating to Sept. 7, 2012, in which Kimbrel converted a save opportunity while pitching on a third straight day. In those contests, he hasn’t given up any runs while striking out 25, walking two, and allowing five hits over 15⅓ innings.

“It’s not the first time I’ve thrown three days in a row,” said Kimbrel. “It might be the first time in a while, but I was focused on pitching and I’ll worry about how I feel tomorrow.”

It seems safe to assume that Kimbrel won’t be pitching Tuesday in Toronto. Yet given the likely availability of Barnes against the Blue Jays, the need for Kimbrel won’t be as acute. His willingness to pitch Monday played a significant role in allowing the Red Sox bullpen to follow a successful blueprint in a one-run win.

“He’s the leader of our bullpen,” said LeVangie. “What he does helps everyone else sort of fall in line. It’s working. We all see what Craig does. [The other relievers] see what Craig does. They all just fall in line.”

### **Brian Johnson ready for his second big league start**

Julian Benbow

After traveling a trying and winding road over his first five seasons as a professional, Brian Johnson came into this season feeling restored.

The 26-year-old lefthander was building confidence in his fastball, which was starting to show the life it once had before ulnar nerve irritation forced Johnson to cut short his season two years ago. He had trust in the effectiveness of his secondary pitches, especially his curveball.

And there were no traces of fear remaining from the horrific incident in 2012 when he was struck in the face by a line drive in just his fourth minor league appearance, during a Futures at Fenway game with Single A Lowell.

Two weeks ago, Johnson was tested again.

He was five innings into his first start of the season with Triple A Pawtucket when he was struck on the side of the head by a line drive. He left the field under his own power and was well enough to start five days later. In that game, he held Syracuse to one run over 6⅔ innings while striking out eight, while allowing just four hits and one walk.

“Honestly, the only way I think you can shake it off is to take one in the face before that,” Johnson said. “You take one in the face, one in the head is not too bad. Honestly, I’d take that one any day of the week before I take that first one, so it wasn’t bad.”

Johnson was ready to travel with the PawSox to Charlotte, N.C., on Monday morning when he got the call that he’d be needed to make a spot start Tuesday for the Red Sox in Toronto. Scheduled starter Eduardo Rodriguez went on paternity leave following the birth of his son on Easter.

It was a call Johnson said he’d been waiting for since 2015, when he made his only major league appearance — a 4⅓-inning start in Houston in which he allowed four runs.

“I don’t even know how to express it,” Johnson said. “Being healthy and having a chance to do it again is everything I would hope for. You’re not guaranteed that chance again. Now that I have that opportunity, I hope to make the most of it.”

Johnson hasn't factored into a decision in two starts with Pawtucket this season, but he's allowed only two runs over 10⅔ innings while recording 15 strikeouts.

"Strike-throwing has been good, percentage of strikes has been much improved, sharpness to the secondary stuff is there," said Red Sox manager John Farrell. "The velocity's probably not where it was two springs ago, but improved over a year ago. He's been through a lot, but ready to go."

Rays remember

Alex Cobb and Evan Longoria were on the 2013 Rays team that faced the Red Sox in the Patriots Day game that year, which concluded prior to the Marathon bombings.

Returning four years later to play on Marathon Monday brought back memories of not just the chaotic and tragic scenes but of the strength the city showed in responding to the bombings, Cobb said.

"We got done with the game, and we were all kind of heading toward the bus, and people's phones started going off a little bit at that point about something happening, but we didn't really think much of it," he said.

Cobb recalled then-teammate David Price getting a text message from former Sox third baseman Will Middlebrooks, who sent a photo of the chaos outside his apartment.

"That's when it started to hit us," Cobb said.

The Rays kept a close eye on the developments when they got back to Tampa. But for Cobb, who was born in Boston and still has family here, there was a personal attachment. His wife Kelly had been at the finish line that morning for the wheelchair race.

The first time the Rays returned to Fenway Park, Cobb said he could sense the city was stronger despite the tragedy. It's the same four years later, he said.

"You could feel that in the city of Boston," Cobb said. "You can feel that today."

Minding their time

Knowing that the start times for the last half of the homestand would vary wildly, including Monday's 11:05 a.m. start, Farrell said the team held an advance meeting about handling the scheduling kinks.

"There's some reminders that go along with that," Farrell said. "There's some things that are posted daily to adjust accordingly. So I think as long as we stay aware of the changes and we outline what the daily schedule's going to be, there's no confusion, but maybe our internal clocks are thrown off a little bit and not getting into that normal day-to-day routine."

Nine of the Sox' first 13 games this season were day games. They went 6-3 in those games. Dating to last May, they've won 21 of their last 24 day games at Fenway.

Taylor up, then down

With Rodriguez on paternity leave, Ben Taylor was recalled from Pawtucket to give the Sox an extra arm in the bullpen. He recorded the final out of the seventh inning, escaping a bases-loaded jam. After the game, Taylor was sent back down to make room for Johnson . . . The Sox have their first three-game winning streak of the season . . . The Sox lead the American League with a .328 average with runners in scoring position . . . Mookie Betts extended his streak of plate appearances without a strikeout to 123, the longest active streak in the majors and the longest streak by a Sox player since Denny Doyle's 159 plate-appearance run in 1975.

## **Red Sox take series finale from Rays**

Julian Benbow

Not even a week ago, Robbie Ross Jr. was pitching for Triple A Pawtucket, still shaking off the flu that landed him on the disabled list.

He was activated from the DL last Thursday and the next day put in  $2\frac{2}{3}$  innings of relief in the Red Sox' 10-5 loss to the Rays. He gave up two runs on three hits in a rough season debut.

Getting back to normal was a process.

“Just getting that consistency back and then also my body,” Ross said. “The recovery from feeling as sick as I was, it kind of took a toll on how my elbow felt, my shoulder felt, and ultimately breathing on the mound.”

Monday, not even two hours before the Sox were to play their Patriots Day game against the Rays, Ben Taylor was still planning on getting to Pawtucket's McCoy Stadium by 10:30 a.m. to catch the bus for the team's flight to Charlotte, N.C. The reliever found out at 9 that his services would be needed in Boston after setup man Matt Barnes and closer Craig Kimbrel had both pitched on back-to-back days.

Neither Ross nor Taylor figured they'd find themselves at the center of the pivotal point in the Sox' 4-3 win.

“Not even in my mind,” Taylor said.

But with the Sox trying to hold on to a two-run lead in the seventh inning, manager John Farrell leaned on Ross and Taylor to get three crucial outs.

Starter Steven Wright started the inning by giving up a single Tim Beckham. With Wright at 98 pitches, Farrell called on Ross.

“The biggest thing was try to get in there and try to get the quickest outs I could,” Ross said. “In that situation, it was just like, ‘All right, Steven's battled his tail off, so now it's time to come in and try to shut it down.’”

He caught some tough luck when Corey Dickerson blooped a 2-and-2 breaking ball down the left-field line that hopped over the short fence for a ground-rule double, putting Ross in a treacherous second-and-third situation.

But he settled down, using his breaking ball to strike out Kevin Kiermaier, intentionally walking Evan Longoria, then going back to his breaking ball to fan Brad Miller before Farrell handed the ball to Taylor.

“Robbie's two breaking balls on a 3-2 count to Miller might be the difference in this ballgame today,” said Farrell.

Taylor gave up Steven Souza's RBI single to left that shaved the Sox' lead to 4-3 and created a bases-loaded, two-out situation. But he got Logan Morrison to fly out, making sure the Sox escaped the inning with the lead.

With Heath Hembree pitching a 1-2-3 eighth and Craig Kimbrel striking out all three batters he faced in the ninth for his sixth save of the season, Wright was able to pick up his first win.

“That's part of the dynamic of being in the bullpen,” Ross said. “You just come in and do whatever role you have to get into.”

Wright gave up two runs in the first inning (he's given up nine first-inning runs in his three starts this season, more than 28 other teams), but Hanley Ramirez got the Sox on the board in the bottom of the inning with an RBI single.

The Sox capitalized on a Rays error in the second after Miller dropped a feed from Beckham that would've given Tampa Bay an inning-ending force out.

Rays starter Blake Snell walked Dustin Pedroia, then gave up a two-run single to Andrew Benintendi followed by an RBI single by Mookie Betts. Suddenly the Sox had a 4-2 lead.

Andrew Benintendi sends a two-run single to center field in the second inning.  
BARRY CHIN/GLOBE STAFF

Andrew Benintendi sends a two-run single to center field in the second inning.

"Huge break," Farrell said. "It was almost like blood was in the water, and we took advantage of it. It caused Snell probably an additional 15 pitches in the inning, we were able to bunch some base hits together right after that."

Wright put together his 10th career start with at least six innings and one or fewer earned runs allowed. Then the bullpen did its job, allowing the Sox to take three of four in the series, with two wins by one run.

"It's just a fun group to be a part of," Hembree said. "Watching the first person come out of the bullpen, it sets the tone. We like to keep that tone and finish the game out."

## **\* *The Boston Herald***

### **Red Sox notebook: Brian Johnson to take Eduardo Rodriguez' turn in rotation tonight in Toronto**

Jason Mastrodonato

He's been hit in the head with a line drive twice in five years, held up at gunpoint in his home state and endured time away from baseball to deal with overwhelming anxiety.

Today, Brian Johnson is coming back to the Red Sox.

"He's been through quite a bit and we're looking forward to the opportunity for him tomorrow," manager John Farrell said.

The wild ride continues for the University of Florida alum, as he's due to start the opener of a three-game series with the Blue Jays tonight in Toronto. Eduardo Rodriguez, who was originally scheduled to start, is away from the team on paternity leave after he welcomed a baby boy Sunday, according to Farrell.

Reliever Ben Taylor was recalled from Triple-A Pawtucket to take Rodriguez' roster spot and add depth to the bullpen for yesterday's 4-3 win at Fenway Park against the Tampa Bay Rays. Johnson will be recalled from the PawSox and take Taylor's roster spot today.

It will be the second career major league start for Johnson, who made his debut in 2015 against the Astros in Houston, where he took the loss after allowing three runs on three hits and four walks while striking out three in 4 1/3 innings.

In 102 2/3 innings over two Triple-A starts this year, the left-hander allowed two runs and posted a 15-4 strikeout-to-walk ratio.

"Strike-throwing has been good," Farrell said. "Percentage of strikes has been much improved. Sharpness to the secondary stuff is there. The velocity is probably not where it was two springs ago, but improved over a year ago."

Johnson is more of the soft-tossing variety who can spin a breaking ball better than most in the minors has occasionally struggled with command. But to even have him available after he was hit in the head with a line drive two Saturdays ago is remarkable.

“Honestly, I think the only way I think you can shake it off is to take one in the face before that,” Johnson said. “You take one in the face, one in the head is not too bad. Honestly, I’d take that one any day of the week before I take that first one, so it wasn’t bad.”

A first-round pick in 2012, Johnson nearly lost his eyesight after he was hit in the face with a liner while pitching for Single-A Lowell during the Futures at Fenway game just two months into his pro career. Doctors later told him he narrowly avoided losing his eyesight.

Johnson has a career 3.14 ERA in Triple A.

“You definitely appreciate the call up more when you don’t know what lies next,” he said. “It took two years and it was a long path in between that, but I’m excited to be here.”

Sandoval sits

The Red Sox benched Pablo Sandoval, their home run leader (three) and RBI leader (nine), to get him a break against a left-handed starter in the Rays’ Blake Snell. The left-handed hitting Marco Hernandez got the nod at third base over the switch-hitting Sandoval.

Hernandez went 0-for-3 with two strikeouts and error.

Sandoval is 0-for-10 as a right-handed hitter to start the season and 6-for-42 (.143) overall.

“There’s contact there,” Farrell said of Sandoval. “There’s not the overall swing-and-miss. . . . We know that he is stronger from the left side. That’s readily apparent to all of us. I think from where it was a couple of years ago when he abandoned right-handed hitting, to a year absent and a lot of work done in the offseason, there is improvement there.

“But Marco is there today to keep him involved, keep him sharp.” . . .

Finally, some success against lefties for Andrew Benintendi.

The lefty-hitting outfielder was 6-for-36 with 13 strikeouts and a paltry .411 OPS against lefties during his brief major league career, then ripped off three straight singles against Snell in a 3-for-4 performance. Two of the singles went against the shift and he is hitting .314 for the season.

“They were playing a big shift on me, and sometimes on a pitch away I would just try to poke it that way,” Benintendi said. “There were some fortunate hits in there, but I’ll take it. . . . The shift is kind of like The Wall. It will give a few hits and it will take away some hits. So you just have to take it as it is.”

Inspirational time

The 11:05 a.m. Patriots’ Day start can leave players feeling tired, but the atmosphere at Fenway makes up for being out of their normal routines.

“It was awesome,” Benintendi said. “I felt like the energy in the stadium was really high. It was an early game, but it was awesome to come out there and everybody kind of just united around one another.” . . .

Center fielder Jackie Bradley Jr. (knee) and utility man Josh Rutledge (hamstring) will begin rehab assignments with Pawtucket today.

**Red Sox put things together during successful homestand**

Chad Jennings

Routine ground ball to shortstop. Easy throw to second base. Plenty of time to make the play.

If the Rays execute that most basic fielder's choice, the second inning is over and a game-changing rally never gets off the ground. If Brad Miller doesn't close his glove too early, the ball doesn't slip away, the Red Sox might not have a win on Patriots' Day, and this momentum-building homestand wouldn't have its cherry on top.

"It was almost like blood was in the water," Sox manager John Farrell said. "And we took advantage of it."

With a walk and back-to-back singles from the top of the order, the Red Sox cashed in for three unearned runs that made all the difference in yesterday's 4-3 win in front of a show-up-early, stay-to-the-end packed house at Fenway Park.

That crowd seemed ready to believe, and these Red Sox showed up ready to earn their trust.

Exactly one week earlier, the Sox had blown a Chris Sale gem because their only run came on a bases-loaded, no-outs double play — also right after an error — in the second inning in Detroit. There was blood in the water that day too, but the Red Sox were sick and shorthanded and underwhelming.

Not now. After three straight wins, and five in the past seven games, the Sox look like a different team.

The Opening Day logo is fading behind home plate at Fenway, and so are the memories of that cold and rainy first series with the Pirates. Largely forgotten, too, are those four games in Detroit, when it seemed half the team was missing, and those who remained were outgunned.

Rookie outfielder Andrew Benintendi has six hits in his past nine at-bats, raising his average from .238 to .314 and reminding us why the team put so much faith in the kid in the first place.

New guy Mitch Moreland has shed his image as a glove-first defender by setting a franchise record for consecutive games with a double. And the lefty-hitting first baseman singled in the game-winner against a lefty Sunday.

Supposed-to-be MVP candidate Mookie Betts, who came down with the flu in the opening week and had just three hits through his first 20 at-bats, has nine hits (three doubles) in his past 18 trips to the plate. The right fielder and Benintendi had the big hits yesterday.

"We haven't abandoned our approach at the plate," Farrell said. "Guys haven't come out of their approach. They haven't had the one game with the one swing of the bat. We've built innings. We've faced very good pitching from a number of teams. I think it's that relentlessness that we've been trying to preach and continue to have it filter over from the trust in that lineup from top to bottom."

The pitching, too, looks better than it did not so long ago. The shorthanded bullpen has come together around new set-up man Matt Barnes, quietly effective lefty Robby Scott and overpowering closer Craig Kimbrel, who recorded a save each of the past three days without allowing a baserunner and while recording seven strikeouts.

Oh, and Sale is three starts into his Red Sox career and already drawing comparisons to Pedro Martinez.

"I don't see us slacking off any," Kimbrel said. "I think our bullpen is going to be really good, and if we're going to win games, our bullpen is going to have a lot to do with that. And our guys know that down there. We're going to do everything we can to help this team win."

It's fair to assume the Red Sox won't continue to hit .328 with runners in scoring position all year, but it's also fair to assume they won't always have the fewest home runs in the majors.

At some point, Kimbrel's streak of 25 consecutive converted saves will come to an end, but also at some point, starter David Price and relievers Tyler Thornburg and Carson Smith should come off the disabled list to boost the staff.

Make no mistake, there will be fresh problems somewhere down the line, but for now, the Sox have cleared their earliest hurdle as if it were only a matter of time.

"Just, I guess, more games, more pitches," Benintendi said. "Overall, I think, as a team we're starting to click."

### **Red Sox relievers role on in win against Tampa Bay**

Jason Mastrodonato

John Farrell has either been really lucky or really smart.

It doesn't matter which.

What matters is the Red Sox are now 8-5, having escaped with another close win, 4-3 over the Tampa Bay Rays yesterday, thanks to near-perfect management of a bullpen that entered the season without two of its best three relievers, Tyler Thornburg and Carson Smith.

Farrell still hasn't given out direct roles and has been frequently changing how he uses everybody but closer Craig Kimbrel on a day-to-day basis.

Heath Hembree didn't find out he was pitching the eighth inning yesterday until it was time for him to warm up.

"They told me when they called down," Hembree said. "Later in the game. I was stretched out and being ready for any situation if they called for me. It just happened to be the eighth."

This kind of uncertainty can drive some relievers crazy. At the moment, it's working pretty well.

The 'pen submitted three important scoreless innings to seal the win yesterday, and it did so without Matt Barnes or Joe Kelly, who both needed rest after some heavy workloads over the weekend.

With Thornburg and Smith out, the openings in the bullpen have motivated others who knew promotions were possible if they stepped up in a time of need.

"They have," Farrell said. "And once we got into the latter part of the first week of the season, roles have started to define themselves a little bit more. I think guys have been able to mentally prepare for their time in the game. Most importantly, though, they're coming out and executing. That entire group has done a very solid, if not outstanding, job."

Six of the Sox' wins have come by a margin of two runs or fewer, with the other two coming by margins of three and seven runs.

While good teams like the Texas Rangers and St. Louis Cardinals, popular preseason picks to make the playoffs, are off to difficult starts thanks to staggering bullpen problems, Farrell has managed the Red Sox relievers to a sparkling 1.84 ERA, fourth-best in the majors.

"You want to pitch in those late innings, tight-ballgame roles," Hembree said. "But anyone in the bullpen can do that. Everybody down there has quality stuff. We're not surprised."



It always helps to have good players, and Farrell has a few, particularly in Barnes and Kimbrel, who have combined to throw 14 $\frac{1}{3}$  innings with 22 strikeouts and a 0.63 ERA to start the year. But Farrell has also been forced to carve his way through late innings with guys like Robbie Ross Jr., Robby Scott and Ben Taylor.

Farrell had limited options after making the straightforward decision to remove knuckleballer Steven Wright when he allowed a single to start the seventh inning with a 4-2 lead.

With two lefties up, Farrell called on Ross, who allowed a fluke, ground-rule double to Corey Dickerson (the ball landed about 40 feet behind third base before jumping into the stands) and struck out Kevin Kiermaier. Farrell called for an intentional walk to Evan Longoria, setting up Ross to face another lefty, Brad Miller, whom he struck out.

How about this for confidence in the new guy: Farrell then summoned Taylor, a former seventh-round draft pick with only 21 games of Double-A experience before this season.

With a fastball in the low 90s, Taylor isn't the most intimidating reliever in the league. Steven Souza Jr. sliced a single into left to cut the lead to 4-3, but Taylor reached back and retired Logan Morrison, a left-handed hitter who had a solid weekend feasting on Red Sox pitching. Taylor was optioned to Triple-A Pawtucket after the game, but not without praise from his teammates.

"Knowing they have some trust in me, that's a huge thing," said Taylor, who was called up from the minors just for the game. "Hopefully I can build on that."

After Taylor escaped the seventh, Hembree pitched a perfect eighth inning.

Kimbrel put in his third straight day of work to pitch the ninth, striking out the side. He didn't pitch three days in a row until mid-May last year.

"I think last year I was battling through some things and maybe got in some bad habits, but right now everything feels great," Kimbrel said. "Hopefully I can keep it going."

Farrell is asking a lot of his 'pen — Red Sox relievers have averaged more than 3 $\frac{1}{3}$  innings per game. But what else can he do when four of his five starters — all but Chris Sale — have an ERA over 5.00?

The Sox still aren't hitting home runs, but took advantage of a crucial error by Miller, who dropped a routine out at second base in the second inning, to score three unearned runs on Rays starter Blake Snell.

Wright didn't have his best knuckleball, but made it work until the seventh inning.

Thirteen games in, the Red Sox bullpen is the team's MVP.

## **\* *The Providence Journal***

**Even as he thrives, the education of Andrew Benintendi is ongoing**

Brian MacPherson

BOSTON -- That Andrew Benintendi still wears gear representing his alma mater does not make him unique in the Red Sox clubhouse. That Benintendi would still be in college had the Red Sox not offered him \$3.5 million to sign as a draft-eligible sophomore two years ago, well, that certainly does.

And it's through that prism that it remains important to view the contributions and limitations of Boston's dynamic young outfielder, both of which have been on vivid display in the first two weeks of the season.

He came to spring training as a fixture not just on the roster but in the top half of the batting order -- and that only makes it easier to forget he could still be playing center field for Arkansas this spring were he not so prodigiously talented.

Benintendi sparked the Red Sox to a pair of wins Sunday and Monday thanks in large part to the bat control that makes him an ideal top-of-the-order hitter. He hit a checked-swing double down the third-base line in the first inning Sunday and came around to score. He hit a swinging-bunt infield single in the seventh inning and again came around to score. He then smacked a double down the line.

Monday, Benintendi delivered the game's decisive hit in the second inning Monday, staying on a left-on-left breaking ball from Blake Snell and lining it to center field for a two-run single. He also slapped a single to left field, going against an infield shift, and beat out a slow roller toward second base.

With three hits Monday, Benintendi is now hitting .314 with a .390 on-base percentage and a .431 slugging percentage through 13 games. He's one of only three players to have appeared in every game.

But Benintendi has at times looked overmatched as the ersatz center fielder, even though it's a position he played exclusively until last July.

Benintendi made the move to left field when it became clear he was on the fast track to the major leagues, as he wasn't going to displace Jackie Bradley Jr. in center field. He moved back to center field last week when Bradley suffered a knee sprain that landed him on the disabled list. He hasn't looked entirely comfortable since his return. It stands to reason that will change with time, even if Bradley returns by next weekend.

"It has been a while, I feel like," he said. "But it's nothing new."

Benintendi misjudged a Brad Miller fly ball that hit the base of the Green Monster on Sunday, allowing it to get over his head and then bounce back past him for a two-run triple. The Red Sox have grown accustomed to Bradley making the catch on similar fly balls with relative ease. Benintendi jumped too early on the Miller fly ball and didn't even come all that close.

"That's a ball I probably should have caught," he said.

And the inexperience of Benintendi seemed to create an awkward situation on the basepaths on Thursday against Pittsburgh when he tagged up at second base on a Hanley Ramirez fly ball that eventually fell, rather than drifting away from second base at a distance that would allow him to get back and tag if the ball were caught.

"I was going back to second base because I thought he was going to catch it," Benintendi said after that game, "and I saw Mookie right there. I thought, if he doesn't catch it, I'm scoring -- which I did."

Though Benintendi scored, him staying so close to second base meant speedster Mookie Betts had to slow down behind him -- and Betts ended up being tagged out at the plate.

"You want to be able to score with one out, and you always want to be in a position to tag with none out," Red Sox third-base coach Brian Butterfield said. (There was one out when Ramirez hit his fly ball.) "We talk about separating from the base with one out so if the ball drops you're halfway."

But that's the type of mistake one might expect from a player who still has fewer than 50 big-league games on his resume, a player who won't turn 23 until July, a player for whom an Arkansas Razorbacks shirt could be a uniform rather than a souvenir.

**\* *The Springfield Republican***

## **Andrew Benintendi's family following Sox outfielder's rise from the 'Garage Mahal' to Fenway Park**

Jen McCaffrey

DETROIT - Seated 21 rows behind home plate with the sun beaming down on a warm Saturday afternoon at Comerica Park, Chris Benintendi bounced his right leg in anticipation.

His son had just stepped to the plate.

"Come on, Andrew," Benintendi whispered.

Andrew, of course, is Andrew Benintendi, the Red Sox rookie outfielder. Here he came to the plate with the bases loaded in the third inning during the first weekend series of the 2017 season.

Benintendi's family made the four-hour drive to Detroit from his hometown, Madeira, Ohio, a small suburb of Cincinnati, in the southwest corner of the state.

On this particular trip, Benintendi's parents, Jill and Chris, his youngest sister Lilly, Jill's twin sister Joy, Chris' college roommate and best friend Chris Stokes, and Jill's parents, Donald and Doris Brookbank, made up his personal cheering section.

It was one of the smaller groups that's traveled to see Benintendi play. Jill's father had been in the hospital the previous week, but there was no way he was missing this trip. The group was decked in Red Sox shirts, hats and jerseys amid a sea of Tigers navy, white and orange.

At the plate, Benintendi swung and missed.

"Oh gosh that's the pitch to hit," his father said with a groan.

"You always get mad at him for swinging at the first pitch," Jill said.

"Not a first-pitch fastball over the middle of the plate," Chris replied.

Benintendi grounded into an inning-ending double play.

"I'm surprised they turned that double play given where that ball was," Chris said. "They were in a little bit."

Chris' good-natured in-game analysis is a running joke within the family and something they've all teased him about over the years.

"He's almost like a manager in his mind," the Red Sox outfielder said afterward. "The way he thinks and he understands the game and the situations and I think I've learned a lot from him in that aspect."

Benintendi's family, and particularly his dad, lives and dies with each pitch and each play.

A few months removed from his major league debut last August, the shine has not worn off for the close-knit midwestern family. Detroit was one of several road trips planned for this season to watch Benintendi, a preseason favorite for American League Rookie of the Year, play his first full year in the big leagues.

The family has already purchased a suite down the left field line at Great American Ballpark when the Red Sox travel to Cincinnati in September to play the Reds. They're expecting close to 100 friends and family members.

Andrew Benintendi's family on the excitement of watching him with the Red Sox

The Reds' park is about about 12 miles from the Benintendi's home in Madeira. But when Andrew was young, they didn't go to games all that often. He was more into playing the game than watching.

In their backyard, Chris would pitch him tennis balls.

"I'd heat it up a little bit and I'd say to Jill, 'I feel like I'm throwing real hard but he's hitting the ball pretty hard,'" he said.

Early on they noticed his smooth, natural swing.

"People ask me if I taught him that, and I'd say, 'No, I'm the first guy that didn't screw it up,'" Chris said. "I didn't teach him anything. As he got older, we'd talk about technique, about how to go from here to the ball, especially a little guy, you can't waste any movement. But beyond that, the swing itself is really what he's had."

It wasn't just hitting, though. Chris would take a tennis racket and smack the ball as high as he could into the air.

"He'd go flying around the backyard and catch it and we thought, 'Well, that's kind of cool,'" Chris said.

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Back on the field, Benintendi stepped to the plate again for his third at-bat in the top of the sixth.

"I'd love to see a line drive here to left center field because he's out in front of everything," Chris said. "He's getting ground balls to the left side, see it deeper and maybe hit a line drive to left center."

"Come on Andrew!" Jill yelled.

Benintendi flied out to left on the next pitch.

Like most kids, Benintendi was dead set on becoming a pro baseball player. And like many parents, Chris and Jill encouraged him, but also wanted a realistic goal, too.

"We'd say to Andrew, you need Plan B and C. Get your education," Jill said.

Chris grew up on farmland in Georgetown, Ohio, about an hour southeast of Cincinnati, right on the Ohio River. His father, Robert, was the son of Italian immigrants, became a physician and his mother, Sally, a nurse. Robert, particularly, stressed education to their children.

After Chris played college ball at Whittenburg University, he went on to get his law degree.

"Chris' dad, when he calls Andrew, he'll ask, 'Have you read Sophocles yet?'" Jill said.

All four of Benintendi's grandparents have traveled to see him play since he reached the big leagues.

"As much as we enjoy it, we're so happy for my parents who are in their 80s, Jill's father who's in a wheelchair, but they get to see this and enjoy it," Chris said.

The quartet of grandparents made the trip to Cleveland for the American League Division Series last October. Benintendi homered in the third inning of Game 1. His mom caught video of it on her phone and made sure to pan to the grandparents for the pure joy in the moment. Benintendi saved that video to his phone.

"You ask (Jill's) dad and he'll probably say that's one probably one of his best moments in his life," Chris said.

Baseball was his main sport, but Benintendi excelled in basketball, too, at Madeira High School, the only public high school in his hometown.

The summer ball circuit was where he got most of his exposure, though, particularly with the Midland Redskins, a national powerhouse program that produced major leaguers like Barry Larkin, Ken Griffey, Zack Greinke and Mike Matheny.

Midland drew players from around the country, but was located about a half hour away from Madeira. Benintendi played for Midland's fall team during his sophomore year and the following summer he was slated to play for the U16 team. But when the U18 season began, a couple players from around the country hadn't arrived yet, and Benintendi got called up to fill in for a week. He impressed the coaches so much that they decided to keep him on the U18 roster, batting leadoff and playing center.

As a 15-year-old on the U18 team, Benintendi matured quickly. The oldest of 18 grandkids on his dad's side and second oldest of seven cousins on his mom's side, that maturity was already there, if unrefined.

His success at Midland led to several inquiries from Division I schools. He ultimately decided on Arkansas after visiting the school at the suggestion of a Midland teammate who was already on the Razorbacks team.

Benintendi posted mediocre numbers his freshman year hitting .276 with a .701 OPS. But his sophomore season put him on the map, hitting .376 with a 1.205 OPS, 20 homers, 13 doubles and two triples. He drew 50 walks and struck out 32 times.

Because he turned 21 within 40 days of the 2015 draft, Benintendi was a draft-eligible sophomore -- and teams were scrambling for looks at him. Boston was one of them.

Chris Mears was the Red Sox's area scout covering Arkansas and much of the midwest at the time.

"I felt like my connection with (Mears) was the best," Benintendi said. "He was a laid-back guy like me so it was easy to talk to him and joke around, so I felt that my relationship with Boston throughout the entire process was probably the most personable and probably the most comfortable."

The Red Sox had the No. 7 overall pick in 2015, thanks to a last-place finish in 2014. Benintendi was still on the board when it was their turn. The small-town, country kid was headed to Boston.

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Back on the field in Detroit, Benintendi came to the plate for his fourth at-bat, this time against a lefty reliever.

Chris teased his 13-year-old daughter Lilly that it was her fault her brother hadn't gotten a hit yet because she wasn't cheering loud enough.

Benintendi swatted a 1-1 fastball to right.

"There we go!" Chris said.

"I thought we were going to be 0-for-Detroit," he added with a smile on his face.

Andrew Benintendi's family watches him single for the Red Sox vs. Detroit  
In southwestern Ohio, Chris' five siblings all live relatively close by. When Andrew was in high school, his baseball and basketball games were a gathering spot for dozens of family members.

Brian, the youngest of Chris' brothers, hosts family watch parties for Benintendi's games in the garage that he's converted into a lounge. Posters, photos and school flags of all the Benintendi kids cover the walls and even the ceiling of the Garage Mahal, as they've named it.

To know the Benintendis is to be able to take a good joke. No one is safe.

One of the family's more epic pranks came in the Garage Mahal in 2015.

The family had a chance to watch one of Benintendi's Single-A Greenville Drive games on TV, so Brian invited Chris and Jill and his oldest brother Bobby to the garage.

Unbeknownst to Chris and Jill, Brian and Bobby had contacted Greenville play-by-play announcer Ed Jensen before the game to call in a favor.

"We're watching and Bobby my brother is videotaping the at-bat and 'I'm like Bobby what are you doing, we're watching the game?'" Chris said. "He says, 'I don't know, he may hit a home run or something.'"

"So the second time up, he's videotaping again. Jensen, as he's calling the game, he says, 'I had a chance to talk to Andrew today down in the dugout and I congratulated him on being the seventh overall pick of the Boston Red Sox. I said to him, I guess you can thank your dad back in Cincinnati for a lot of your success and Andrew says, 'No, not really. I've really got to thank my uncles Bobby and Brian who were my inspiration. Dad was mediocre. But Uncles Bobby and Brian inspired me to play baseball.'"

Chris knew right away his brothers had somehow pulled off the master joke coordinating with Jensen. He and Jill erupted in laughter.

"Here's what's funny about it," Chris said. "Brian had one hit in high school and Bobby probably had 10 or 15 so that's it. It was perfectly set up.

"I told Andrew if anybody asks you why you wear No. 16, you've got to say with a straight face, 'Well first of all my dad wore 16 in college, but secondly, it's the number of combined hits my Uncles Bobby and Brian had in high school.'"

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Back at Comerica Park, the game ended in a 4-1 Red Sox loss. The Benintendis made plans to meet Andrew outside the clubhouse. Dinner that night consisted of pizza in the hotel room, low key per Andrew's request.

But when they met Andrew in the tunnel outside the visitors' clubhouse in Detroit, they found out he'd been battling a stomach bug and had thrown up in the tunnel next to dugout after his sixth-inning at-bat. That explained his subpar day at the plate, according to Chris.

They exchanged hugs, Jill ensuring her son that she was nearby if he needed her to be on sick duty, and agreed to hang out the following night so Andrew could get some rest.

After all, Jill and Chris had just been in Boston the previous week for Andrew's first big league Opening Day.

They had seats on the Green Monster, in the front row next to one of the light poles. In the fifth inning, Benintendi came to the plate and blasted a three-run homer into the seats. As he rounded second base, the normally reserved Benintendi, lifted his hand and pointed toward the Monster at his parents.

It reminded Chris of a time 10 years before when his then 12-year-old son playing in a tournament in Cooperstown, N.Y., hit his first homer over the fence and gave his parents a thumbs up as he rounded second base.

"It was a nice moment," Chris said, recalling Opening Day. "In fact, that moment to me probably meant way more than the home run in Cleveland (during the ALDS) because I was so happy for him and our parents (then).

"It was just something he did because he knew we were there."

It's been a whirlwind eight months for Benintendi, who's now managing those AL Rookie of the Year expectations. But like that time in Cooperstown, like Opening Day, and like that weekend in Detroit, his family has been there every step of the way.

### **Brian Johnson has excellent opportunity vs. Blue Jays**

Christopher Smith

TORONTO -- "This guy can't catch a break!"

We've said it about Brian Johnson too many times now.

The Red Sox 26-year-old southpaw, who's 0-0 with a 1.69 ERA in two starts for Triple-A Pawtucket so far this season, will start in place of Eduardo Rodriguez vs. the Toronto Blue Jays at Rogers Centre tonight (Tuesday) with Rodriguez going on paternity leave.

Maybe Johnson finally is catching his long overdue break.

After all, Red Sox starters have combined for an ugly 5.18 ERA in 13 games. It's a perfect time for Johnson to show manager John Farrell and president of baseball operations Dave Dombrowski what he can do -- and to prove he deserves more of an opportunity with Boston.

His lengthy list of bad luck since the Red Sox drafted him in the first round in 2012 (31st overall) is staggering:

\* Johnson fractured multiple bones when a comebacker hit him in the face while he was pitching for the Lowell Spinners at Futures at Fenway during 2012.

\* The Red Sox used an almost all-rookie starting rotation during the final two months of the 2014 season after trading Jon Lester, John Lackey and Felix Doubront. Johnson would have received his chance then. But the lefty, who made his major league debut July 21, 2015, instead spent those two months on the disabled list with elbow irritation in the ulnar nerve area.

"I was down in Fort Myers and watching a (Red Sox) game in my room and I swear I looked out and I had played with every guy on the field at one point in time," Johnson said back in January 2016.

\* He got carjacked in October 2015 but luckily wasn't hurt.

\* He missed about two months of the 2016 season to be treated for depression and anxiety. Johnson said he has others with depression and anxiety in his family.

"Last year didn't play out the way I thought it was going to," Johnson told MassLive.com during spring training. "I'm better for having gone through that. But I think the biggest thing for me is knowing that I'm ready this year. Last year, really at no point in time until the end of the year did I feel I was ready to be in the big leagues mentally. And now I feel like I'm ready to help in any way possible. I feel great."

Brian Johnson, Boston Red Sox LHP, attended Florida with Tim Tebow who he hit with fastball unintentionally

Brian Johnson, Boston Red Sox LHP, attended Florida with Tim Tebow who he hit with fastball unintentionally  
Boston Red Sox's Brian Johnson had no reason to plunk Tim Tebow who gave the Boston Red Sox lefty some fun memories during his freshman year of college.

\* Johnson, for the second time in his pro career, got hit in the head with a comebacker during his 2017 debut at Triple-A Pawtucket (April 8).

But he luckily escaped the scary incident uninjured and returned to make his scheduled start this past Thursday vs. Syracuse. He gave up just one run, four hits and one walk while striking out eight in 6 2/3 innings vs. Syracuse.

"From the strike throwing issues of a year ago to being hit four years ago to a recent one, I think it says a lot about the resiliency and the competitiveness that's there right now," Farrell said.

Farrell listed his top depth starters in order April 5. He named Johnson third behind Kyle Kendrick and Henry Owens.

"With the benefit of having a couple of days notice, Kyle Kendrick certainly would be the guy that we would go to," Farrell said back on April 5. "Beyond that, when you get into it three or four weeks, rest is going to be a key component to factoring in who's available."

Johnson is the only rested starter able to pitch Tuesday. Owens pitched four days ago and Kendrick pitched three days ago.

But Johnson perhaps would have been the top option anyway if all three were rested. A lot has changed since April 5. Johnson has been the best pitcher of the three in those couple weeks.

He'll get his chance to show what he can do tonight. He's certainly a guy worth rooting for.

### **Red Sox bullpen posts 1.84 ERA through 13 games; Craig Kimbrel extends saves streak**

Jen McCaffrey

BOSTON - Over the weekend, the Red Sox bullpen allowed just two runs in 14 1/3 innings, highlighting what has become an unexpected strength of the club in the first few weeks.

The uncertainty surrounding Tyler Thornburg's injury coupled with an early season bout with the flu, made the Boston bullpen a question mark.

Through 13 games this season, Boston's bullpen has posted a 1.84 ERA. The rotation, with a 5.18 ERA, has relied heavily on the relief staff.

On Monday, that trend continued. The bullpen preserved a one-run lead with three innings of scoreless ball. Craig Kimbrel, pitching for the third straight day, notched his third straight save, and 25th straight dating back to last season. That's the second-longest active streak in the majors.

Robbie Ross Jr., Ben Taylor and Heath Hembree proceeded Kimbrel to the mound, holding the Rays at bay.

Starter Steven Wright allowed a leadoff single to start the seventh and manager John Farrell lifted him in favor of Robbie Ross Jr.

Ross gave up a ground-rule double and then intentionally walked Evan Longoria to load the bases.



He got the next batter to strike swinging on curveball before Taylor took over. The rookie allowed a single, scoring a run (credited to Wright) but then got a flyout get out of the inning.

On Sunday, it was a similar story as Joe Kelly fired 2 2/3 innings of one-hit relief with Matt Barnes, Robby Scott and Kimbrel following him to the mound.

"Once we got into the latter part of the first week of the season, roles have started to define themselves a little bit more," Farrell said. "I think guys have been able to mentally prepare for their time in the game. Most importantly, though, they're coming out and executing. That entire group has done a very solid, if not outstanding job."

Kimbrel, particularly, has been sharp, not allowing a hit this weekend while striking out seven of nine batters faced.

"We have a lot of really good arms down there, a lot of guys who really get along with each other, who really feed off each other," Hembree said. "It's just a fun group to be a part of."

### **Andrew Benintendi, Red Sox beat Rays on Patriots' Day; Steven Wright rebounds to earn win**

Christopher Smith

BOSTON -- Andrew Benintendi went 3-for-4 and delivered the go-ahead single in the second inning here on Patriots' Day.

The 22-year-old left-handed hitter went up the middle vs. Rays left-handed starter Blake Snell for a two-run single that put Boston ahead 3-2.

The Red Sox won 4-3 here at Fenway Park on Marathon Monday.

Benintendi, who went 3-for-5 in Boston's win Sunday, has record multiple hits in three of his past four games.

During that span, his batting average has increased from .235 to .314.

All three hits Monday came against the lefty Snell.

### **WRIGHT REBOUNDS**

Red Sox's Steven Wright rebounded after the worst outing of his career in his previous start vs. Baltimore. He allowed eight runs on eight hits, including four home runs in 1 1/3 innings while losing to the Orioles here last Wednesday.

But after that start, Wright declared, "I feel stronger than I've ever felt (physically)."

It looked like it would be another disappointing day for the knuckleballer here Monday. He gave up three straight hits to begin the game. The second batter singled after third baseman Marco Hernandez failed to catch a pop-up in foul ground.

Two runs scored but both were unearned because Hernandez was charged with an error.

Wright end up allowing three runs, one earned, nine hits and one walk while striking out four over 6-plus innings and he earned the victory.

### **WRIGHT SETTLED IN (AND ESCAPED A FEW JAMS)**

Derek Norris doubled to begin the second but Wright stranded him there, getting the next three hitters (one groundout and two flyouts).

Wright again escaped trouble during the third inning. A double and single put runners at the corners with one out. But Wright got Logan Morrison to pop out and Rickie Weeks Jr. to strike out swinging.

Kevin Kiermaier singled to lead off the fifth. But Wright got Evan Longoria to ground into a double play.

#### BULLPEN DOES THE JOB

Wright allowed a single to Tim Beckham to begin the sixth and then John Farrell replaced him with reliever Robbie Ross Jr. who gave up a ground-rule double on a ball that probably should have been caught.

Ross struck out Kiermaier, intentionally walked Evan Longoria, then struck out Brad Miller.

Ben Taylor relieved Ross and gave up an RBI single to Steven Souza Jr. that made it 4-3.

But Taylor escaped with the lead, getting Morrison to fly out to right.

Heath Hembree pitched a perfect eighth inning, recording two strikeouts.

Craig Kimbrel pitched for the third straight day. He struck out the side in the ninth. The

#### HERNANDEZ STRUGGLES WITH SANDOVAL SITTING

Marco Hernandez has had success vs. lefties at Triple-A Pawtucket and Boston. And so it seemed logical to start him at third base vs. Blake Snell who he went 3-for-3 against last year.

Pablo Sandoval, meanwhile, is 0-for-10 vs. lefties this year.

Hernandez though reached on an error and struck out twice.

### **\* *The Worcester Telegram & Gazette***

#### **Red Sox Journal: Brian Johnson to start on Tuesday night**

Bill Ballou

BOSTON — It is a time of good fortune for two Red Sox southpaw pitchers, Eduardo Rodriguez and Brian Johnson.

Rodriguez is the father of a baby boy, born Sunday, and has taken paternity leave. That leaves Boston in need of a starting pitcher for Tuesday night's game in Toronto and the Sox have recalled Johnson from Pawtucket to fill the void.

It will be Johnson's second major-league start, the other one coming on July 21, 2015 in Houston. He pitched poorly in that game, allowing four hits and four walks for four runs in 4 1/3 innings as the Astros won, 8-3.

Johnson has had injury and emotional issues throughout his professional career, which is in its fifth season. He has made two starts with the PawSox this year and is 0-0 with a 1.69 ERA in those games. Johnson has struck out 15 in 10 2/3 innings.

"Healthy and confident," is how Johnson described himself as he got ready to head off to Canada.

Johnson was hit in the face by a line drive as a rookie pro in 2012 and missed most of that season with facial fractures. He took another liner to the head on April 10 with the PawSox, but is none the worse for that one.

“I’d take that one over the first one any time,” Johnson said.

For Monday’s game, Boston recalled rookie reliever Ben Taylor from Pawtucket, then sent him back down immediately.

Unusual stats

Pablo Sandoval got the day off on Monday with lefty Nate Snell on the mound for Tampa Bay. Marco Hernandez was the Red Sox’ starting third baseman.

Sandoval does not hit lefties well, and has had an odd season to date. He is batting .143 but leads the team in home runs and RBI, tied with Andrew Benintendi, batting out of the eighth spot.

Manager John Farrell said that while Sandoval’s problems batting right-handed are well documented — he abandoned switch hitting two years ago — he is making more contact so far this year than he had been previously. Sandoval’s nine RBI have come mainly from his team-best three home runs. He has driven in eight with the long ball.

“Opportunistic,” is how the manager described Sandoval’s production, “and he’s squared up some balls that haven’t gone for base hits.”

Probables announced

Tuesday’s game in Toronto begins a six-game road trip for the Red Sox. They play three times in Ontario and three times in Baltimore. The Blue Jays are unexpectedly reeling and occupy last place in the A.L. East. Boston has played pretty well up there in recent years and is 11-6 at Rogers Centre in its last 17 games there.

Marcus Stroman (1-1) will oppose Johnson on Tuesday night. Wednesday’s game is at 7:07 p.m. and features Rick Porcello (1-1) versus Francisco Liriano (0-1). The teams play at 12:37 on Thursday afternoon and the pitchers will be Chris Sale (1-1) for the Red Sox, Aaron Sanchez (0-1) for the Blue Jays.

Tuesday’s game in Toronto will mark the sixth different starting time in six games for the Red Sox. Farrell and his coaches talk to the players ahead of time to get them prepared for the change in routine.

“There was no confusion,” he said, “but our internal clocks are off a little bit.”

Around the bases

The Red Sox improved to 70-52 all-time on Patriots’ Day and are 4-4 in their last eight morning meetings. Boston is 7-1 in its last eight games against Tampa Bay at Fenway Park and 13-4 in its last 17 games here versus the Rays. ... If Red Sox pitchers can keep the ball in the ballpark every game, like they did on Monday, Boston might not lose again this season. The Sox are 5-0 when their pitchers don’t give up any homers, 3-5 when the opposition hits one. ... The four-finger intentional walk has not done much to speed up games, at least not yet. Monday’s affair took 3:07 and included a four-finger walk. All told, the Sox have had six of those in their games and their average time of game is an 3 hours, 37 minutes. ... Sox record chasing so far: Mitch Moreland’s pace is 112 doubles and the team is on a pace to ground into 187 double plays. ... Craig Kimbrel is the first Boston pitcher with three saves in a series since Mike Timlin did it in 2006.

**Red Sox 4, Rays 3: Wright makes early adjustment to pitch Boston to win**

Bill Ballou

BOSTON — Maybe 15 years from now Red Sox fans will be listening to Steven Wright's pleasant voice explain what's going on with their team good or bad, just like they do now with Tim Wakefield.

Maybe some day they will be cheering him on as he approaches 200 career wins, just like they once did with Wakefield

It took a long time for Wakefield to get there, though, and there were detours, flat tires, washed out bridges and no vacancy signs around every curve, or knuckleball.

That's the way it is with baseball's peculiar pitch, the knuckleball. Its practitioners either get everybody out, or nobody out, and a team has to hope that the ledger entries are in the black over the long haul because the short haul can be excruciating at times.

That reality was never more evident than in Wright's performance on Monday, when he pitched Boston to a 4-3 victory over the Rays. It gave the Sox their first three-game winning streak of the season. It was Wright's first win since Aug. 5, 2016, when he pitched the best game of his career.

Wright blanked the Dodgers, 9-0, on three hits in Los Angeles against the Dodgers that day. Two days later he jammed his right shoulder diving back into second base as a pinch runner and things have never been the same.

In five starts since the dive, Wright has an 8.21 ERA and has allowed 24 hits and 9 home runs in 24 innings. It bottomed out five days ago when Wright got four outs and allowed four home runs against the Orioles.

"Anything could be better than that last start," Wright said, adding, "This is definitely a step in the right direction."

Things did not start well, though. He gave up hits to the first three Rays batters in the first and Tampa Bay scored twice, although both runs were unearned because third baseman Marco Hernandez dropped a foul pop.

The Rays had a leadoff double in the second and a one-out double in the third, but Wright refused to yield. The Sox responded with a run in the first and three more in the second and never trailed after that. Wright (1-1, 8.36) allowed one earned run and nine hits in six-plus innings. He struck out four and walked one.

When not doing his TV analyst thing, Wakefield is around to consult with and Wright did a lot of consulting in the aftermath of the Orioles nightmare.

"I can't pick out just one thing," he said of the advice he got. "We talked about so many different things." Key points, though, were staying back over the rubber and following through on his delivery, which helps keep the ball down.

"It's all about feel," Wright added. "Finding a feel, keeping it, repeating it."

Wright was an unexpected All-Star last year and the Red Sox may very well have dropped out of the A.L. East race early if not for his contributions. He was 13-5 with a 3.01 ERA after the Dodgers whitewash, then it all disappeared with the injury.

It sometimes just disappears, anyway, with knuckleballers.

Wakefield was 14-1 after he first came to the Sox in May 1995, then was 6-15 from then on to the halfway point of 1996. He then went 10-5 after that. Wakefield led the league in losses in 1997 at 12-15, then was 17-8 in '98. R.A. Dickey was 20-6 when he won the Cy Young Award in 2012; he is 50-53 since then.

With life in general, patience is a virtue. If you have a knuckleball pitcher on your team, it's a necessity. And if you're lucky, you wind up with a Wakefield and it's all worth it.

## **\* *The Portland Press Herald***

### **Red Sox hold off Tampa Bay, 4-3, in Patriots Day matinee**

Kevin Thomas

The Boston Red Sox scored four runs early and held on for a 4-3 win over the Tampa Bay Rays on Monday afternoon, before a sold-out crowd of 37,318 at Fenway Park.

Steven Wright gave up three runs (one earned) over six-plus innings, and the Red Sox bullpen took over from there. Craig Kimbrel recorded his third straight save and sixth this year.

Boston had nine hits, including three from Andrew Benintendi, who knocked in two runs.

The Red Sox (8-5) won their third straight against Tampa Bay (6-8).

Errors played a critical factor in the scoring. Five of the seven runs were unearned.

Wright (1-1) gave up a leadoff single to Corey Dickerson and appeared to get Kevin Kiermaier to fly out in foul territory, but third baseman Marco Hernandez bobbled it.

Kiermaier then singled, as did Evan Longoria to load the bases. Two RBI groundouts followed and the Rays led 2-0.

Wright's knuckleball danced more after the first inning.

"It's all feel. Finding that feel, keeping it and repeating it," he said.

Boston got one run back in the first with three singles, including Hanley Ramirez's RBI line drive to right.

In the second, Sandy Leon singled with two outs. Hernandez hit a grounder to shortstop Tim Beckham, but second baseman Brad Miller dropped Beckham's toss, keeping the inning alive.

"I just didn't catch the ball," Miller said. "It ended up costing us three runs and it ended up being the difference in the game."

Dustin Pedroia walked to load the bases. Benintendi hit a soft liner to center field for a two-run single and a 3-2 lead.

"Off the bat, I thought it would drop farther in front (of the fielder), but it kind of hung up there a little bit," Benintendi said. "Fortunately it (dropped) ... I just got pitches and executed."

Mookie Betts followed with an RBI single, and Boston led 4-2.

"It was a huge break," said Red Sox Manager John Farrell. "It was almost like blood was in the water and we took advantage of it."

Not only did Miller's error open the door to three runs, it caused starting pitcher Blake Snell (0-2) to throw 24 more pitches in the inning.

Wright was steady. He got out of a jam in the third – first and third, one out – with a pop-up in foul territory (Hernandez got this one) and a strikeout.

Wright exited in the seventh after Beckham led off with a single.

Robbie Ross relieved, allowing a double and walk, striking out two.

Ben Taylor, just called back up from Pawtucket, relieved and gave up an RBI single to Steve Souza. Taylor stayed in to face left-handed slugger Logan Morrison, and got him to fly out to right.

Heath Hembree pitched a 1-2-3 eighth, with two strikeouts. Kimbrel also went 1-2-3, all by strikeout.

He got Dickerson with a 98 mph fastball, Kiermaier with a curve and Longoria with a 99 mph fastball.

NOTES: The Red Sox announced that pitcher Eduardo Rodriguez is on paternity leave and will miss his Tuesday start in Toronto. Brian Johnson will make the start instead ... Taylor was called up Monday to fill in. After the game, he was sent back down, and Johnson was called up ... Jackie Bradley Jr. (knee) and Josh Rutledge (hamstring) were running the bases before Monday's game. Both will next join Pawtucket for rehab games. Bradley is expected to play with the PawSox on Tuesday and Wednesday, and then rejoin the major league team in Baltimore on Friday.

### **On Baseball: Two years later, Brian Johnson gets another chance with Red Sox**

Kevin Thomas

BOSTON — The line drive hit Brian Johnson in the side of the head 10 days ago, and he was so grateful.

It's all perspective.

"I think the only way to shake that off is to take one in the face before that," Johnson said. "You take one in the face, then one in the head is not too bad."

Johnson, 26, a left-hander who will start for the Boston Red Sox on Tuesday night in Toronto, has dealt with his share of adversity – physically and emotionally – beginning with a liner to his face in 2012.

The comebacker five years ago ended Johnson's rookie pro season. He needed to recover from a broken nose and 16 fractures in his face, mostly around his eyes and nose.

That is why Johnson can say the shot to the side of his head on April 8, while making his first 2017 start for Triple-A Pawtucket, was "not too bad."

Johnson left the game under his own power. He made his next scheduled start last Thursday.

"I just had to get back out there. I didn't want anything to linger from the start before," he said. "I felt well."

And he looked it.

Johnson pitched 6<sup>2</sup>/<sub>3</sub> innings, giving up one run on four hits and one walk, striking out eight.

"The strike-throwing has been good, much improved," said Red Sox Manager John Farrell. "Sharpness with the secondary stuff is there. The velocity is probably not where it was two years ago, but improved over a year ago."

Initially, Johnson was not considered the first starting option out of Pawtucket. Major League veteran Kyle Kendrick had a much better spring training, but has struggled with the PawSox (0-2, 10.38), and his last start was Saturday.

Boston realized it needed a pitcher when starter Eduardo Rodriguez went on paternity leave after the birth of his son Sunday night. The PawSox were scheduled to fly out Monday morning to Charlotte, North Carolina. Johnson's phone rang.

"It was nine in the morning," Johnson said. "I was about to go to the field, to get on the bus (to the airport). Good timing."

Johnson spoke from the Fenway clubhouse after Monday's game. He was packing his Pawtucket gear bag, readying for the flight to Toronto. He walked into Farrell's office, and the manager leaped to his feet with a huge grin.

Who wouldn't be glad to see Johnson get another shot at the majors?

"He's been through quite a bit," Farrell said. "I'm looking forward to the opportunity with him (Tuesday)."

Johnson rebounded from that initial, violent injury in 2012. He reached Double-A Portland in 2014 (a stellar 10-2 record, 1.75 ERA) and made his major league debut in July 2015.

But after that start (four runs in 41/3 innings), Johnson was shut down for the season with nerve problems in his arm.

In the offseason, Johnson was a passenger in a car that was carjacked in Florida. He appeared to recover from that.

But early in the 2016 season, Johnson did not feel right. The arm was improved, but Johnson was battling anxiety, putting too much pressure on himself. With the Red Sox help, he took a break from May to July. He eventually came back and made his final eight starts with Pawtucket.

Coming into this season, Johnson's spring training numbers (5.40 ERA) did not inspire confidence. Then came another line drive to the head – but away from his face.

Johnson got back up and excelled.

"It says a lot about (his) mental strength," Farrell said. "To being hit in the head four years ago, to the recent one, I think it says a lot about the resiliency and the competitiveness that is there right now."

Johnson is commanding his low 90s fastball, while mixing in an above-average curveball.

After Johnson made his first appearance with the Red Sox in 2015, it seemed like he would be back soon – not almost two years later.

"You definitely appreciate the call-up more because you don't know what's next ... It took two years. It was a long path, but I'm excited to be here ... I don't even know how to express it.

"It is everything I hoped for. You're not guaranteed to get that chance again. Now I have opportunity.

"Healthy, confident and I'll try to make the most out of tomorrow."

**\* *RedSox.com***

## 'Pen comes up big as Red Sox edge Rays

Ian Browne and Craig Forde

BOSTON -- To preserve knuckleballer Steven Wright's win on Patriots' Day, the Red Sox's relief crew needed to be just about spotless.

And it turns out it was.

Manager John Farrell deployed four relievers for the final nine outs, capped by a third straight dominant outing by closer Craig Kimbrel in a 4-3 triumph over the Rays on Marathon Monday.

Though roles are still evolving with the setup crew, Farrell again pushed the right buttons. Meanwhile, Kimbrel's role hasn't evolved at all, nor does it need to. The hard-throwing righty was perfect the last three days, retiring all nine batters he faced while striking out eight and picking up three saves.

"Once he proclaimed himself available today, there was no hesitation to go to him in the ninth inning," said Farrell. "He's probably in the best spot he's been in from a delivery standpoint in the year-plus that he's been here."

It was a typically festive atmosphere for the annual 11:05 a.m. ET contest, coinciding with the 121st Boston Marathon, which passed just behind Fenway Park en route to the finish line in Copley Square. The Sox improved to 70-52 on Patriots' Day.

"It was awesome," said Andrew Benintendi, who led the offense with three hits and two RBIs. "I felt like the energy in the stadium was really high. It was an early game, but it was awesome to come out there and everybody kind of just united around one another. It's awesome."

Knuckleballer Steven Wright fell into an early 2-0 hole, but came back nicely to get his first win of the season. The righty gave up nine hits and three runs, but just one earned over six-plus innings. He walked one and struck out four.

"He gives up the early runs, then he does a nice job," said Rays manager Kevin Cash. "He made some big pitches to get out of some innings. We had guys on base and runners on. It seemed like he quieted us pretty good once we got a guy on base."

The Red Sox did most of their damage offensively in a three-run second, capitalizing on an error by second baseman Brad Miller that should have been the third out of the inning.

Robbie Ross Jr., Ben Taylor and Heath Hembree formed a sturdy bridge to Kimbrel, who struck out the side in the ninth. Boston's bullpen has a 1.84 ERA in the first 13 games of the season.

"It's not the first time I've thrown three days in a row. It might be the first time in a while, but I was focused on pitching and I'll worry about how I feel tomorrow," said Kimbrel.

### MOMENTS THAT MATTERED

Miller drop haunts Rays: It looked like Blake Snell was on his way to an uneventful second inning that was about to end when Marco Hernandez hit a grounder to short. But that all changed when Miller dropped the routine feed from Tim Beckham for an error. The Red Sox went on to score three unearned runs in the frame, and Snell wound up throwing an extra 24 pitches.

"You've got to play well to win. Especially on the road. Especially in this division. We didn't play well enough to win," Miller said.

Ross, Taylor protect lead in 7th: After a double by Corey Dickerson, the Rays had runners at second and third with nobody out in the seventh, trailing, 4-2. Ross Jr. helped minimize the damage by striking out two. Taylor, recalled prior to the game, allowed an RBI single to left by Steven Souza Jr. to make it a one-



run game. But the righty got the out he needed with a bases loaded and two outs, retiring Logan Morrison on a flyout to right.

"Just trying to go in there and get the quickest outs I could," said Ross. "In that situation, it was, like, Steven battled his tail off, so now it's time to come in and try to shut it down."

#### QUOTABLE

"Yeah, it definitely was a little different waking up at 7:30 in the morning. It was fun. It was a great atmosphere. I think any time you go out in Fenway when it is sold out, it doesn't matter what time it is, it's really easy to get up for these games."

-- Wright on the early start time

"It hurts, but look, we've got to overcome it. We're going to make errors and that's part of it. But, we have to overcome it, You don't look at it as an error made and three runs crossing the plate because of that. Each at bat is separate in its own and we didn't get guys out after that."

-- Cash, on the second inning

#### SOUND SMART WITH YOUR FRIENDS

The Red Sox have been a dominant team in the daytime at Fenway of late, going 21-3 over their last 24 home day games dating back to May 14, 2016.

#### WHAT'S NEXT

Rays: Right-hander Matt Andriese will be the first Rays pitcher to toe the rubber versus a non-AL East club this season when he starts on Tuesday vs. the Tigers at 7:10 p.m. ET. He was strong in his last outing, allowing just one run over six innings versus the Yankees, doing well to work his way out of jams in the process.

Red Sox: With lefty Eduardo Rodriguez on paternity leave, fellow southpaw Brian Johnson will be recalled from Triple-A Pawtucket to start Tuesday's 7:07 p.m. ET contest in Toronto. This will be Johnson's second Major League start. His debut was on July 21, 2015, at Houston.

#### **Patriots' Day brings special buzz to Fenway**

Quinn Roberts

BOSTON -- On most days in the morning around Fenway Park, it's a quiet atmosphere. A handful of cars are driving down Yawkey Way, a slew of people are walking to work.

Not on Monday. Thanks to Patriots' Day and a traditional 11:05 a.m. ET start between the Rays and Red Sox, fans lined the streets waiting to get into restaurants and bars, a brass band played outside on Yawkey and the sizzle of onions from vendors could be heard and smelled. Those fans went home happy as the Red Sox inched past the Rays in a 4-3 win.

Steven Wright tossed six-plus solid innings for his first win of the season and Andrew Benintendi went 3-for-4 with two RBIs.

With Boston Marathon runners just a few hundred yards away in Kenmore Square, fans were decked out not only in Red Sox gear, but marathon attire. One man even walked the streets in a Revolutionary War outfit.

"This is such a traditional day here in New England. The centerpiece obviously being the marathon, but our game, as unique as it is at 11 o'clock in the morning -- there's no other game like this," Red Sox manager John Farrell said. "While it is early, it's out of the normal schedule for us, even for a day game, it's one that

there is a historic element to this and a lot of celebration that goes on around it. So we're more than happy to be a part of it."

Before the game, the Red Sox draped an American flag over the Green Monster, staff sergeant Melissa Lackore sang the national anthem and the United States women's hockey team threw out the first pitch. Tanya Collen, from Boston, came with her husband and son. They made sure to take a picture on the David Ortiz Bridge before heading inside Fenway.

Collen worked at Cask'n Flagon when the Red Sox won the World Series in 2013, so she knows what the excitement of a Red Sox game can feel like.

"This is all so nostalgic," Collen said. "I love getting to celebrate a day like this with my family. All of my cousins are in town, and they got here at 7 a.m. to take in everything in and around Fenway."

Ben and Julie Hollingsworth, from Bedford, Mass., surprised their three children on Easter with tickets to the game. It marked the first Patriots' Day game for their twin daughters, Emma and Lyla.

Emma yawned frequently on the family's walk to the ballpark because of a 7 a.m. wakeup call, but her parents still knew the experience would be worth it.

"It is so fun and everyone on the streets are smiling," Julie said. "You really get a sense of the heritage of the city and what the Red Sox mean to the city."

Judy Johnson, from Nottingham, N.H., is a balloon artist on Yawkey. She said on Patriots' Day she uses many more red, white and blue balloons.

"I get chills thinking about the day. How can it not be emotional?" Nottingham said. "How can you not get emotional because of everything that's happened on this day? We are all patriots at heart." It wasn't just Red Sox fans who enjoyed Patriots' Day, but the players on both teams.

Rays first-base coach Rocco Baldelli, a Woonsocket, R.I., native, never made it to a Patriots' Day game growing up, but he always knew of friends and family who were involved in the festivities.

"It's a good day for the community up here. It's a fun time," Baldelli said. "It's a very lively day and I think there's a lot of people out there who enjoy it every year."

Wright admitted that the game time was a bit unusual, but he didn't mind.

"With it being so close to Spring Training, it wasn't so bad. It definitely was a little different waking up at 7:30 a.m., but it was fun," Wright said. "Any time the game is sold out, it doesn't matter what time it is. It is really easy to get up for these games."

Benintendi, who's in his first full season with the Red Sox, tried to take in everything going on around him. "It was awesome. The energy in the stadium was so high," Benintendi said. "It was an early game, but it was awesome. Everyone is sort of united around one another."

### **Adjustment helps Wright make knuckler dance**

Ian Browne

BOSTON -- Five days removed from the worst start of his career, it was hardly comforting for Steven Wright or the Red Sox when his knuckleball was flat in the early going of Monday's outing against the Rays.

But Wright made an in-game adjustment and found the mechanics necessary to make his signature pitch dance like it is supposed to, and he helped lead the Red Sox to a 4-3 win in the annual Patriots' Day game at Fenway Park.

After giving up two runs on three hits in the first and a double to open the second, Wright righted himself in a big way, buckling down for the rest of the day to go six-plus innings while allowing nine hits and three runs (one earned) with a walk and four strikeouts.

"It looked like he didn't have very good command of his knuckleball early. Then he started throwing it more for strikes and it started dancing a little bit more," said Rays right fielder Steven Souza Jr. "It was pretty straight early. It can turn like that with knuckleballers, honestly."

Unlike the mighty struggles vs. the Orioles on Tuesday -- 1 1/3 innings, eight runs, four homers -- this was something to build on for Wright.

"I thought he was kind of leaking out a little bit where you saw a number of knuckleballs that were up, with a lack of depth to them," said Red Sox manager John Farrell. "So he made a subtle adjustment and he made a couple of big pitches with men in scoring position."

"Today was the first day you saw Steven have the normal effort and intensity or aggression in his delivery and still able to command the baseball. Today was certainly a positive step for him, even after the first inning today. So hopefully this is one that he can build upon from here."

In the days leading up to the start, Wright spent a lot of time with resident Red Sox knuckleball guru Tim Wakefield.

"I worked a lot. I was blessed that Wake happened to be here this week, so I definitely was talking to him constantly over the last four or five days, just trying to bounce some things off of him," said Wright. "Just trying to get back to that rhythm and timing that I had last year. He's helped me tremendously."

What were the key talking points with Wakefield?

"It's never easy to narrow it down to one," said Wright. "A lot of it is just timing and balance and staying over that back side. I definitely get in the habit of rushing forward too much and the ball starts spinning and stays up. It doesn't get the opportunity to go down. We've just really been concentrating on staying over the rubber and finding that rhythm and tempo."

It's understandable why Wright would come into this season in a mechanical funk, given that a right shoulder injury limited him to just two starts the final two months of last season.

For a refresher course of what kind of weapon Wright can be for the Red Sox when he is in a groove, look at his sparkling first half of 2016, when he went 10-5 with a 2.68 ERA and was an All-Star.

"It's all feel," said Wright. "It is just finding that feel and repeating it. For me, it's just really concentrating on finishing the pitch. The ball is going to follow your hand. I still have some work to do. I don't feel like I threw the ball as well as I know I can. It's definitely a good step in the right direction."

### **Rodriguez put on paternity leave, Taylor recalled**

Ian Browne

BOSTON -- Red Sox lefty Eduardo Rodriguez, who welcomed a baby boy into the world on Easter Sunday, was placed on the paternity list and will miss his scheduled start against the Blue Jays in Toronto on Tuesday.

Lefty-hander Brian Johnson is expected to be recalled from Triple-A Pawtucket to make that start, while righty reliever Ben Taylor -- who had a solid stint with the Red Sox earlier in the season -- was recalled on Monday to fill Rodriguez's roster spot and escaped a key jam in the seventh to help preserve a 4-3 win over the Rays.

Johnson was hit in the head by a line drive in his first start of the season for Pawtucket but bounced back with a strong performance just five days later, allowing one hit over six innings.

"His strike-throwing has been good," said Red Sox manager John Farrell. "Percentage of strikes has been much improved. Sharpness to the secondary stuff is there. The velocity is probably not to where it was two spring's ago, but improved over a year. He's been through quite a bit. Looking forward to the opportunity for him [Tuesday]."

This will be the second start in the Majors for Johnson. He made his debut at Houston on July 21, 2015, giving up three hits and four runs over 4 1/3 innings.

Johnson has faced adversity since then, going through elbow woes and anxiety that led to a medical leave. Farrell has been impressed the way the 26-year-old has bounced back.

"I think it says a lot about the resiliency and the competitiveness that is there right now," Farrell said. The 24-year-old Taylor made his first career Opening Day roster this season, despite having never pitched above the Double-A level prior to the season.

He allowed only one run in 5 1/3 innings (1.69 ERA) over three relief appearances with Boston, striking out seven batters and allowing only three hits. According to the Elias Sports Bureau, Taylor is the only Red Sox pitcher in the expansion era to strike out each of his first three batters faced in the Major Leagues. In two starts this season, Rodriguez is 0-2 with

## **\* *ESPNBoston.com***

### **Nine up, nine down, seven K's: Three pretty good days for Craig Kimbrel**

Scott Lauber

BOSTON -- When at last they reached Kenmore Square on Monday, the runners of the 121st Boston Marathon had to find one more burst of energy to get them through the final three-quarters of a mile to the finish line.

Craig Kimbrel had a similar feeling.

Kimbrel had pitched the previous two days for the Boston Red Sox, leaving manager John Farrell unsure whether his closer would be available for an 11 a.m. series finale against the Tampa Bay Rays. When the game began, Farrell figured Kimbrel could use the rest. As it progressed, the plan changed.

And when the ninth inning arrived, with the Red Sox holding a one-run lead, it was Kimbrel who jogged out of the bullpen, unleashed 15 pitches and struck out the side to save a 4-3 victory, the Red Sox's third win in a row.

"Initially, I think we were going to go with a day off," said Kimbrel, who recorded three saves in as many days for the first time since July 24-26, 2015, for the San Diego Padres. "But as the day went on, before I went out to the bullpen, I told John I felt great and if the situation was there, I wanted it. And it worked out that way."

It couldn't have worked out any better, actually. During the past three days, Kimbrel faced the minimum nine batters, struck out seven and looked to be, in Farrell's words, "in the best spot he's been in from a delivery standpoint in the year-plus that he's been here."

On Patriots' Day in Boston, Red Sox closer Craig Kimbrel made short work of Tampa Bay -- again. Michael Ivins/Boston Red Sox/Getty Images

"I think so, yeah," Kimbrel said, agreeing with his manager's assessment. "I think last year I was battling through some things [with a knee injury that required midseason surgery] and maybe got in some bad habits. Right now, everything feels great. Hopefully I can keep it going."

Kimbrel dealt with issues related to his delivery in spring training, struggled to command his curveball and white-knuckled his way through a few saves in the season's first week. On April 9 in Detroit, for example, he gave up one run on one hit and two walks and needed to rely on every last ounce of his power fastball to strike out the side and nail down a 7-5 win.

But Kimbrel showed no traces of those issues against the Rays. Of the 38 pitches he threw, 28 were strikes. And he threw everything, including his curveball.

Kimbrel should be the least of Boston's worries in a bullpen that is only beginning to establish order. With setup man Tyler Thornburg not yet close to returning from the disabled list, Matt Barnes has taken over the eighth-inning role. Heath Hembree got a chance in the eighth Monday with Barnes unavailable.

While Farrell's faith in hard-throwing Joe Kelly appears to have waned, he had enough confidence in right-hander Ben Taylor to bring him into a two-on, two-out spot in the seventh inning. Never mind that Taylor didn't find out until about 9 a.m. that he was being called up, just enough time to make the drive from the Red Sox's Triple-A home in Pawtucket, Rhode Island. He allowed a Steven Souza Jr. single to load the bases before getting Logan Morrison to fly out.

But when it comes to the ninth inning, there isn't any ambiguity, even on days when Kimbrel isn't sure he has much in the tank.

Asked whether he could remember not taking the ball when given the choice, Kimbrel said, "I don't think I have. There might be a day, but today wasn't it."

And as long as Kimbrel's delivery remains as smooth as it looked against the Rays, Farrell will sleep more soundly.

"I think any pitcher goes in and out of it as the year goes on," Kimbrel said. "It's just [a matter of] not getting far away from what you're comfortable with so you can get right back to making a pitch when you need it."

**\* CSNNE.com**

### **Kimbrel Is At His Red Sox' Best, But Don't Overhype Bullpen**

Evan Drellich

The Red Sox relief dominance continued Monday in 4-3 Patriots' Day win over the Rays, an afternoon that closed the four-game series.

Unfortunately for Dave Dombrowski, 13 games do not prove Sox relievers are primed to be this good, or close to it, for the long term. The potential for excellence is much easier to see now — but still, hard to bank on.

There's really only one certainty, one guy with a track record: Craig Kimbrel. And it was just a few outings ago where his control looked as shaky as it did in September.

No longer. The closer's mechanics are finally in sync, and he struck out seven of the nine batters he faced in the three-game series with the Rays.

The last three days for Kimbrel were just an overwhelming display of dominance. He struck out the side Monday facing the top of the Rays order while throwing for a third consecutive day. He initially thought he'd be unavailable, but after taking treatment, let it fly.

"He's probably in the best spot he's been in from a delivery standpoint in the year-plus that he's been here," Sox manager John Farrell said. "If you see the work that he puts in after he pitches, he keeps himself in tremendous shape and I think on those days in which he is pitching the third day, it's been when he's been efficient, much like we saw today. Good command, good location, his curveball for strikes."

Kimbrel agreed he's in the best spot of his Red Sox career.

"I think so. I think last year I was battling through a few things and I maybe got into some bad habits," Kimbrel said. "Right now everything feels great. Hopefully I can keep it going."

Through the first 13 games of the season, the Sox 'pen has allowed a .183 batting average, better than every team except the Dodgers (.167) and Yankees (.173).

The relief corps' 1.84 ERA was fourth best, behind those two teams and the No. 3 White Sox.

Considering all the concern for Tyler Thornburg, who has yet to throw a pitch for the Sox; considering Carson Smith isn't due back until June; these stats would have been difficult for anyone to confidently predict.

Sox manager John Farrell, however, said he wasn't surprised by the bullpen's general success.

"No, because it's one that has good stuff," Farrell said. "When you anchor it with a guy who is an elite closer in Craig, it allows those roles to emerge. As long as they execute there is a lot of big league stuff out there. There's power. There's the ability to match-up.

"Robby Scott has come in in some key moments and gotten some key outs. I'll tell you, it's a pretty strong vote of confidence to bring a kid like Ben Taylor into a spot like that knowing he's going to throw strikes and quality strikes. They're pitching well."

Funny Farrell should mention Taylor. He was added to the big league roster for a second time for all of one day on Monday, and was used in traffic in the seventh inning to clean up a mess made by Robbie Ross Jr.

Matt Barnes was unavailable. But Heath Hembree, who handled the eighth inning well, was available. Should Taylor have been used over Hembree with runners on in the seventh? That's an eyebrow-raising move — which moment was more crucial?

But guess what? It worked. One inherited runner scored against Taylor, cutting the Sox lead to 4-3. But Farrell's pushing all the right buttons, and even if he's pushed a wrong one here or there, it hasn't mattered.

This isn't primarily about a manager, though. It's about a group of relievers who are pitching extremely well, with some good fortune mixed in.

Opponents have a .245 average on balls in play against the Sox, which is the fourth lowest mark in the majors. Presumably, a couple more balls will fall in some time soon.

But go beyond that. Just consider the inexperience at play here.

Who can say with that Matt Barnes will be the eighth-inning guy, the primary go-to reliever besides Kimbrel, from now until the end of the season?

Joe Kelly was good in long relief on Sunday. He, Barnes and Hembree all throw very hard. They can all be dominant. But consistency isn't in their track record. A guy like Kelly hasn't even had time to establish a track record.

The roles were fluid to start the year, and both hiccups and role changes should be expected from here.

There's Kimbrel and there's everyone else, as long as Kimbrel doesn't start yanking his curveball into the left-handed hitter's batters box again.

Right now, everyone looks good. Outside of Kimbrel, frankly, everyone looks a little too good.

### **Red Sox' Rotation Depth To Be Tested As Brian Johnson Gets Tuesday Start**

Evan Drellich

BOSTON - The Red Sox' thin starting pitching depth is being tested two weeks into the season.

Lefty Brian Johnson is set to make his 2017 Red Sox debut on Tuesday in Toronto in place of Eduardo Rodriguez, who was placed on the paternity list Monday for the birth of his second child.

Righty reliever Ben Taylor was added in place of Rodriguez on Monday, but his stay is likely to be short with Johnson joining the team Tuesday.

Johnson's one of the top depth options the Sox have next to Kyle Kendrick, whose minor league season has not had a stellar beginning. Johnson, unlike Kendrick, can be freely moved between the major leagues and the minors.

Johnson was in major league camp in spring training but his stuff wasn't playing up as it had in the past.

"Strike-throwing has been good. Percentage of strikes has been much-improved," John Farrell said. "Sharpness to the secondary stuff is there. The velocity is probably not to where it was two spring's ago, but improved over a year. He's been through quite a bit. Looking forward to the opportunity for him tomorrow."

Johnson, 26, has not had the easiest road. He was a first-round pick in 2012 who had his first pro start cut short because of a line drive to the face while pitching for short-season Lowell. He made his major league debut for the Red Sox in with a spot start in July of 2015 (four runs in 4 1/3 innings). He missed time last year with anxiety. This year, he took a batted ball to the head again — this time the back of the head.

"Two starts ago. A line drive hit him in the back of the head and I spoke to him the next morning," Farrell said. "He was fine. I think he was eager to get back on the mound. We know what took place when he first signed here.

"I think that kind of says a lot about maybe the mental strength that he's taking everything with, from the strike-throwing issues of a year ago, to being hit four years, to a recent one. I think it says a lot about the resiliency and the competitiveness that is there right now."

**\* NESN.com**

**Andrew Benintendi, Bullpen Power Patriots' Day Win Over Rays**

Darren Hartwell

The Red Sox did their part to make sure Patriots' Day was celebrated properly in Boston on Monday.

The Sox battled from behind against the Tampa Bay Rays for the second consecutive game, relying on the bat of Andrew Benintendi and a strong bullpen effort to squeeze out a 4-3 win at Fenway Park.

Steven Wright finally hit his stride and got some help from his bullpen to earn his first win of the season, as the Red Sox notched their third consecutive victory to improve to 8-5. Boston now is 70-52 all time on Patriots' Day. Here's how this one went down.

#### GAME IN A WORD

Escape.

The Rays threatened often after a big first inning, but Wright and the Red Sox's relievers found a way to wriggle free each time. Boston's pitchers combined to hold Tampa Bay to 3-for-15 with runners in scoring position and stranded Rays nine runners.

#### IT WAS OVER WHEN...

Ben Taylor got Logan Morrison to fly out with the bases loaded to end the seventh inning. After getting called up from Triple-A Pawtucket just hours earlier, the right-handed reliever helped squander the Rays' best chance to jump back in front.

#### ON THE BUMP

— Wright settled down after a rocky first inning to deliver a serviceable start for Boston. The knuckleballer allowed three consecutive hits to start the game, two of which came in to score on RBI groundouts from Brad Miller and Steven Souza Jr. But after escaping a pair of jams in the second and third innings, the right-hander found his groove, retiring eight of 10 Rays batters. Tim Beckham's lead-off single chased Wright from the game with no outs in the seventh inning. Only one of Wright's three runs allowed over six-plus innings was earned, thanks to Marco Hernandez's first inning error on a dropped pop-up. He surrendered nine hits while walking one and striking four on 98 pitches.

— Robbie Ross Jr. entered for Wright and loaded the bases on a Corey Dickerson double and an Evan Longoria intentional walk. He struck out two, however, exiting with two outs in the seventh frame.

— Taylor was thrown into the fire to replace Ross allowed an RBI single to Souza that scored Wright's inherited runner. Taylor prevented any further damage, though, retiring Morrison to keep Boston on top 4-3.

— Heath Hembree pitched a lights-out eighth inning, striking out two in a 1-2-3 frame.

— Craig Kimbrel struck out the side in the ninth to earn his sixth save in as many chances this season.

#### IN THE BATTER'S BOX

— Hanley Ramirez got the Red Sox on the board in the first with an RBI single that scored Dustin Pedroia.

— Boston made the Rays pay for a Brad Miller two-out error in the second, scoring three runs after the blunder to take a 4-2 lead. Benintendi delivered the key base-knock, a two-RBI single to center field. Benintendi posted his second consecutive three-hit game, going 3-for-4 to boost his average to .314 on the season.

— Mookie Betts swung a hot bat behind Benintendi, tallying a pair of doubles from the No. 3 hole and extending his strikeout-less streak to 124 straight plate appearances. His second-inning double also drove in what proved to be the game-winning run in Pedroia.



— Pedroia did a nice job setting the table atop the lineup, reaching base twice on a single and a walk and scoring both times.

— The bottom of Boston's order struggled in this one, as the No. 5 through No. 9 hitters combined for just two hits while striking out six times.

**TWEET OF THE DAY** Marco Hernandez had a little extra pep in his step for Monday's matinee.

**UP NEXT** The Red Sox head north of the border Tuesday to kick off a three-game set with the scuffling Toronto Blue Jays. Right-hander Brian Johnson is set to get the start in place of Eduardo Rodriguez, who was placed on paternity leave Monday.

## **\* *Associated Press***

### **Benintendi leads Red Sox over Rays 4-3 on Patriots' Day**

BOSTON -- Steven Wright followed a spot start by working with former Red Sox knuckleballer Tim Wakefield.

He was much better this time.

Andrew Benintendi backed Wright with a go-ahead, two-run single as Boston scored three unearned runs following a dropped throw by second baseman Brad Miller, and the Red Sox beat the Tampa Bay Rays 4-3 on Monday in the annual Patriots' Day game.

Wright (1-1) allowed only one earned run and nine hits before being pulled after a leadoff single in the seventh. The knuckleballer gave up four homers over 1 1/3 innings in his previous start.

Wakefield, who now works with NESN, won 186 games with the Red Sox from 1995-2011.

"I think anything can be better than the last start. I was fortunate to have Wake here, worked a lot," Wright said. "I definitely was talking to him constantly the last four, five days just trying to bounce some things off him to get back to that timing and rhythm I had last year."

Benintendi had three singles in the 11:05 a.m. start, which coincides with the Boston Marathon, and the Red Sox won their third straight after losing the opener of the four-game series.

Rookie Ben Taylor gave up a run-scoring single to Steven Souza Jr. with two outs in the seventh, then retired Logan Morrison on a bases-loaded flyout. Craig Kimbrel struck out the side in the ninth for a save on the third straight day, his sixth this season.

"He's probably in the best spot he's been from a delivery standpoint in the year and a half he's been here," said manager John Farrell, who had planned to give Kimbrel the day off until the closer came to him and said he could pitch.

Boston trailed 2-1 in the second when Miller dropped an easy toss from shortstop Tim Beckham for what would have been an inning-ending forceout on Marco Hernandez's grounder. Benintendi's single to center put the Red Sox ahead, and Mookie Betts singled for a 4-2 lead.

"Just didn't catch the ball and it ended up costing us three runs and ended up being the difference in the game," Miller said. "Just went in and came right out."

Blake Snell (0-2) gave up four runs -- one earned -- and seven hits in five innings. The Rays completed a 1-6 trip that followed a franchise-best 5-2 start.

"Frustrating loss," manager Kevin Cash said. "We talk about for us to have our best chance, we have to play clean baseball. We could probably go back to a couple plays on this road trip that it just didn't go our way."

Some of the Rays were playful in their clubhouse early in the morning, with Morrison joking to teammates about the starting time: "11 o'clock. Let's play baseball."

Brad Miller and Souza Jr. hit consecutive run-scoring grounders in the first. Both runs were unearned because Hernandez, Boston's third baseman, dropped a foul popup by Kevin Kiermaier, who then singled.

Hanley Ramirez's RBI single in the bottom half cut the lead in half.

#### TRAINER'S ROOM

Red Sox: Ramirez was back in the starting lineup at DH after coming out of Sunday's game with a left hamstring cramp. ... LHP Eduardo Rodriguez was placed on paternity leave after his wife, Catherine, gave birth to a boy Sunday. He will miss his scheduled start in Toronto on Tuesday.

#### SPECIAL UNIFORM

The Red Sox wore white home jerseys with "Boston" across the front instead of "Red Sox." It also included a patch that read "Boston Strong." The jerseys and patch were created after the Boston Marathon bombings in 2013.

#### EARLY SIGNING

Ramirez was on the field signing autographs for a while about 30 minutes before the first pitch.

#### STILL GOING

Betts hasn't struck out in 123 consecutive plate appearances, the longest streak by a Red Sox player since Denny Doyle's 159 in 1975.

#### UP NEXT

Rays: RHP Matt Andriese (0-0, 4.50 ERA) is set to start Tuesday when the Rays open a three-game series at home against Detroit. RHP Michael Fulmer (1-0, 2.25) is scheduled for the Tigers.

Red Sox: Brian Johnson (0-0) will be called up from Triple-A Pawtucket to take Rodriguez's turn when Boston opens a series at Toronto, which starts RHP Marcus Stroman (1-1, 1.76).

## **\* Tampa Bay Online**

### **Dropped toss leads to 4-3 loss to Red Sox, ending miserable road trip for Rays**

Marc Topkin

BOSTON — As the Rays trudged out of Fenway Park following their latest mess in Monday's Marathon Day matinee 4-3 loss to the Red Sox, among several issues to discuss was which was more immensely troubling.

The number of mistakes — physical, mental, strategic and more — they made in slogging through the 1-6 road trip that stripped away all the glimmer from their seemingly promising 5-2 start?

Or how poorly they have done in making up for them?

"Frustrating loss," Rays manager Kevin Cash said. "We talk about for us to have our best chance, we've got to play clean baseball. You could probably go back to a couple plays on this road trip that it just didn't go our way. And it was very tough for us to overcome."

Monday's game proved to be a perfect illustration of how they failed at both — Brad Miller making an inexplicable error on a routine play at second base in the second, and nobody doing anything to keep it from costing them the game.

"It hurts," Cash said, "but we've got to overcome it, simple as that."

Despite an early wakeup for the 11:05 a.m. first pitch, the Rays got off to a good start against struggling Sox knuckleballer Steven Wright. They scored twice in the first and were seemingly headed to the dugout with a 2-1 lead after two when starter Blake Snell got the routine ground ball he wanted from Marco Hernandez for a forceout at second.

Shortstop Tim Beckham fielded it and made the easy toss to second.

And the ball somehow bounced in and out of Miller's glove.

"Nothing crazy," Miller said. "Just went in and came right out."

Said Cash: "The next thousand chances he gets on a play just like that, he's going to convert."

Maybe so, but that's the way it has been going for the Rays.

And the cost was extreme.

The Sox went on to score three runs after the inning should have been over, manager John Farrell saying "it was a huge break, almost like blood was in the water and we took advantage of it."

Plus, Snell had to throw 24 more pitches to get out of that inning, which led to him lasting only five (with 102 pitches), thus further taxing their overworked bullpen.

Snell took some of the blame for allowing the bill for Miller's error to run so high, as he walked Dustin Pedroia to load the bases then allowed singles to Andrew Benintendi and Mookie Betts.

"I need to do a better job when that happened," Snell said. "I need to get ahead and put them away quickly. ... I need to shut it down right there."

Cash concurred: "You don't look at it as an error made and three runs crossing the plate because of that. Each at-bat is separate in its own, and we didn't get guys out after that."

So not only did the Rays allow that one mistake to exacerbate the situation, they failed repeatedly with opportunities to seize the game back.

In the third, when they had two on with one out but Logan Morrison popped out and Rickie Weeks struck out. In the fifth, when Kevin Kiermaier led off with a single but Evan Longoria (5-for-25 on the trip) bounced into a double play.

And most frustratingly in the seventh, when they got two on, then after a Kiermaier strikeout and Longoria intentional walk had the bases loaded for Miller, with the chance for ultimate redemption against lefty reliever Robbie Ross Jr.

But Miller went down swinging, a single by Steven Souza Jr. netted just one run and Morrison flied out to kill the rally, and pretty much their chances.

"We've got to be able to pick each other up," Souza said. "We're not going to be perfect all year long. As a team, we have to be able to pick each other up. Blake has to be able to pick up Brad, we've got to be able to pick up our pitcher, the bullpen has to pick up the starters, et cetera. That's how we're going to win."

That happened only once on the weeklong trip through New York and Boston, in the Friday game where they eliminated the margin for error by hitting four home runs (off AL Cy Young award winner Rick Porcello) and helping Chris Archer snap an 11-game losing streak to the Sox.

But when it has been close, the Rays have found a way — or several ways — to, let's say, foul it up.

"The mistakes are going to happen," Cash said. "The play (Monday), I don't even look at that as a fundamental error. I'd probably pass that over as just a fluke.

"But we've got to play fundamentally sound baseball. Everybody in this clubhouse knows this. And we haven't been on this road trip."

So thus far, the Rays have had a pretty good week, and a pretty bad one.

If they don't start playing better, it seems easy to see which way they are headed.